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ascend

Taking your airline to new heights



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Satisfaction Guaranteed

Sabre Airline Solutions[®] acquired Flightline Data Services for its crew scheduling software and services capabilities, which bring all phases of the monthly crew schedule bidding process online. The solutions provide automated, remote management for crew schedulers while simultaneously enabling real-time schedule bidding for crewmembers from almost anywhere, anytime.

■ By Tom Samuel | *Ascend* Contributor

Much of crewmembers' job satisfaction comes from their schedules — where they fly, how often they fly, whether they fly on weekdays, weekends or holidays, as well as their typical duty hours and flight patterns. Crewmember schedules are generally assigned by airline crew planners using varying levels of automation. Depending on the specific airline's regional crew management practices and the airline's crew agreements, the schedule assignment may be based on crewmember seniority, crewmember preferences, fairness or a combination of those factors. Once a schedule is assigned, crewmembers can request changes to their schedules via a process most commonly known as "trip trading."

Crewmembers who have more control over their schedules likely experience higher job satisfaction, and certain industry practices enable crewmembers to better control their schedules. Providing crewmember control, however, often requires airlines to invest in sophisticated technology, but if optimally employed, the investment generally pays back many-fold in terms of crew satisfaction and productivity, resulting in lower absenteeism, reduced reserve utilization and lower crew-related costs.

Americans of all ages and income brackets continue to grow increasingly unhappy at work — a long-term trend that should be a red flag to employers, according to a report released in January by The Conference Board, a not-for-profit organization that has studied and reported on business management practices for more than 90 years.

The report, based on a survey of 5,000 U.S. households, finds only 45 percent of those surveyed say they are satisfied with their jobs, down from 61.1 percent in 1987, the first year in which the survey was conducted.

"While one in 10 Americans is now unemployed, their working compatriots of all ages and incomes continue to grow increasingly unhappy," said Lynn Franco, director of the Consumer Research Center of The Conference Board. "Through both economic boom and bust during the past two decades, our job satisfaction numbers have shown a consistent downward trend."

While some may wish to blame the most recent survey's low satisfaction numbers on the current economic downturn, such an easy answer would be inaccurate. An analysis of the job satisfaction data produced by The Conference Board finds that, unlike the economy, this increasing worker unhappiness is not cyclical. Thanks to technology, however, airlines have new opportunities to address three of the most common causes of job dissatisfaction — work schedules, job empowerment and communication.



Photos: Thinkstock

Preferential Bidding: Addressing Work Schedules

North American airlines often use seniority-based line bidding or preferential bidding to determine flying schedules for future months. While carriers outside North America traditionally follow a “fair and equitable” planning process, preferential bidding has been implemented by several large carriers in recent years and is becoming a more common practice.

A preferential bidding system matches crewmembers to pairings (pre-built trips) based on individual crewmember preferences and factors such as airline seniority while protecting pre-planned events such as training and vacation. Airlines that use preferential bidding often need an automated system to accomplish these complex scheduling tasks.

A preferential bidding system creates greater crewmember satisfaction due to crewmembers’ ability to influence their future assignments. The airline benefits by having reduced attrition and absenteeism from industry-standard practices, increased crew utilization (absences have been accounted for so crews can operate their published schedule) and greater control over reserve crew coverage. An airline choosing to implement a preferential bidding system has to spend some money for automation, but it achieves increased crewmember satisfaction and productivity in exchange (without trying to increase crew satisfaction through significant pay increases).

About 75 percent of North American airlines still use seniority-based line bidding practices, so these airlines have an opportunity to take advantage of preferential bidding to give their crewmembers better control over their schedules while increasing productivity. Airlines outside North America have the opportunity to further satisfy employees and employee groups involved in the control of the planning process without having to revert to adopting hard rules that can impact productivity and overall crew costs.

Automated Trip Trading: Empowering Employees

Trip trading is a global crew management practice where crewmembers are allowed to drop or add portions of their assigned schedule (commonly in the form of unassigned trips) or exchange trips with other crewmembers. Based on the agreements in place between the airline and crewmembers, and the automation available at the airline, one of the following may be true at a particular airline:

- Trading is not allowed due to airline overhead costs to manage legality checks, crew communications, etc.;
- Manual trip trading is allowed, where crewmembers call airline crew scheduling staff to manage trading (this practice costs extra in the form of higher crew scheduler costs);



Crewmember alerts and mobile access are critical aspects of daily crew operations, giving airlines the ability to promptly communicate schedule changes to crewmembers as well as offering crewmembers increased access to their schedules. When a change has occurred to their schedule or a desired trip has been made available for trade, crewmembers can be instantaneously notified via their hand-held or mobile devices.

- Automated trip trading is enabled, which allows crewmembers to drop, add, advertise and exchange trips through the Web, and the crew schedule maintained by the airline crew management system is updated through automation.

In cases where crewmembers are not able to “swap out” portions of their schedule they cannot or do not want to fly, they are likely to take sick time, leaving the airline with the daunting task of covering the open flying by either extending the duties for other crewmembers (and paying premium pay), assigning crew on their days off or using reserve crew. Each of these possibilities could add up to a material increase in crew costs.

Automated trip-trading capabilities give crewmembers more control over their schedule, thus increasing crew productivity as crewmembers look to proactively change undesirable portions of their schedule. Automated trip trading also saves crew schedulers time and helps airlines reduce crew-related costs.

Another benefit of automated trip trading is more efficient reserve utilization — this is accomplished through active reserve balancing. This feature automatically uses crewmember trades to improve the balance of unassigned

trips on a day-to-day basis, reducing the peaks and valleys of unassigned trips throughout the month and decreasing the overall requirements for reserve crews.

Automated trip trading is more popular in North America today, but gaining popularity globally.

Mobility Solutions: Solving Communications Challenges 24/7

Crew communication is an important aspect of daily crew operations. Crewmembers want to have anytime, anywhere access to their schedules and to be notified of schedule changes as quickly as possible.

Airlines want the ability to use automation to notify crewmembers of schedule changes as quickly as possible and to get confirmation that the crewmember has been notified of such schedule changes.

Crewmember alerts and mobile access are two vital components of providing airlines with the ability to quickly and efficiently communicate schedule changes to crewmembers as well as providing crewmembers with increased access to (and control over) their schedules.

Alerts can be used to notify crewmembers through their hand-held or mobile devices

when a change has occurred in their schedules or when a desired trip has become available for trade.

Mobile access is an increased area of focus for airlines and enables crewmembers to view their schedules, confirm notification of changes and even request changes to their schedules. Mobility solutions are another area of technology that provides crewmembers with increased visibility and control over their schedules, resulting in more efficient and cost-effective communications and airline operations.

The Acquisition

Through the acquisition of Flightline, *Sabre Airline Solutions* is now able to provide airlines with an array of new capabilities, including:

- Initial bidding (line bidding) — Distributes bid packages online, sorts lines by preferences, electronically highlights and sorts pairings, collects bids, and processes and displays the final award;
- Preferential bidding — Supports multiple crewmember preferences and builds individual custom work schedules avoiding conflicts with carry-in, vacation, training and other known events; features more than 20 preference types, and each preference can be combined with up to 10 criteria for powerful trip selection; provides a unique model-as-you-go bid sheet interface, enabling crewmembers to spot and correct costly bidding mistakes in advance of bid submission;
- Reserve preferential bidding — Auto-constructs reserve schedules to meet daily reserve requirements according to work rules and legalities and avoids conflicts with carry-in, vacation, training and other known events; permits crewmember input to reserve schedules through preferences such as specific days off, specific days on, work pattern and maximum number of consecutive work days; may be used as a reserve line generator to create optimal reserve schedules;
- Open time live — Fully automates and processes crewmember open-time requests for drops, adds, swaps and trades (with another crewmember) interacting live with the airline's crew management system; displays updated schedules and available open time with pairing sort capability; processes requests in real time with optional crew scheduler intervention; includes management of reserve buffers;
- Trade board — Provides an electronic bulletin board for crewmembers to advertise pairing and vacation trade requests, communicate requests online and view responses from other crewmembers;
- Reserve open time — Crewmembers submit requests for pairings that operate on their reserve days; pairings are assigned



Giving crewmembers the ability to better control their schedules not only increases job satisfaction and productivity but also results in lower absenteeism, reduced reserve utilization and lower crew-related costs.

according to the airline's timing requirements and rules; affected reserve periods are replaced with the pairings;

- Reserve assignment — Crewmembers submit requests for specific reserve duty periods as defined by the airline to replace currently assigned reserve periods; the solution assigns specific duty periods based on crewmember input; remaining crewmembers are assigned the leftover reserve duty periods;
- Vacation bidding — Automates annual vacation bid process and final award; calculates accruals; supports instant processing of ongoing vacation requests for drops, adds, swaps with available periods or trades with another crewmember; requires no management intervention;
- System bid (vacancy/displacement) — Collects crewmember bids for upgrades and/or transfers by base, equipment and position within the company; processes awards using airline rules;
- Training bid — Collects crewmember bids for preferred training dates and processes awards according to airline rules;
- Electronic documents — Electronically distributes documents to user-directed groups and/or classes of crewmembers; enables management tracking of mandatory items by individual receipt;

- Electronic messages — Offers two-way messaging capabilities with secure plain-text e-mail; messages can be sent between management and crewmembers or crewmember to crewmember;

- Crew mobility services — Offers iPhone and other mobile device applications, pilot data sheets and trip alerts for airline crews.

Flightline's crewmember solutions are widely used today with nearly 62,000 active crewmember accounts. During a recent, single one-month period, Flightline supported 1.8 million Web sessions, totaling 36.5 million minutes.

Flightline's crewmember solutions are already integrated and work with *Sabre Airline Solutions* crew management systems at 17 airlines today, helping them lower crew-related costs and provide airline management with cost-effective tools to improve crewmember satisfaction.

The combination of rapid return on investment, reliability and ease of use represent the hallmark of Flightline's products and services. **F**

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